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071034Z Feb 05

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 000999

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARN, NEA/PA, NEA/AIA, INR/NESA, R/MR,
I/GNEA, B/BXN, B/BRN, NEA/PPD, NEA/IPA FOR ALTERMAN
USAID/ANE/MEA
LONDON FOR GOLDRICH

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION ON MIDDLE EAST

Summary

-- Lead story in all papers today, February 7, focuses on front-page coverage of the OECD and UNDP-sponsored "Governance for Development" conference that began at the Dead Sea, Jordan, yesterday. Reports highlight King Abdullah's meetings with different Arab leaders and officials on the sidelines of this conference. Another lead story highlights US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's tour in the region and her meeting with PM Sharon yesterday.

Editorial Commentary

-- "Sharm El-Sheikh summit"

Daily columnist Fahd Fanek writes on the back-page of semi-official, influential Arabic daily Al-Rai (02/07): "It seems that Israeli Prime Minister Sharon has received strong American advice to cooperate with the new Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and to enable Abbas to secure a number of achievements that would grant the latter more legitimacy and allow him to re-launch the peace process in a manner that would achieve President Bush's vision for a peaceful and sustainable Palestinian state.. It also seems that the Palestinian factions have received strong Egyptian advice to quiet down and provide an opportunity for re-launching the peace process.. America provided political support . and also decided to grant 350 million dollars to the Palestinian Authority to reform it and to enable it to play the role that awaits it. Sharon realizes that he cannot anger the U.S. President in his second term, particularly when the latter is no longer at the mercy of the Zionist Lobby or the Jewish vote. The Palestinian factions realize that the Palestinian President is very serious about putting an end to the militarization of the Intifada, amicably if possible, but with force if needed. All this means that there is now an opportunity for a serious move stemming from the Sharm El-Sheikh summit meeting."

-- "The requirement is to stop the American bias for Sharon"

Chief Editor Taher Udwan writes on the back-page of independent, mass-appeal Arabic daily Al-Arab Al-Yawm (02/07): "There is great conviction in the Middle East that peace is something that can be accomplished if only left for the Palestinians and the Israelis to resolve, and that American interventions since the Oslo Accords have led to the deterioration of the peace rather than its advancement. This is true to a large extent. Ever since President Clinton intervened at the Camp David summit, the peace process started its decline towards the abyss, and since Bush came to power, the only evident things were the U.S. bias in favor of Sharon's use of force and the complete hostility towards the Palestinian Authority and its late President Arafat. In short, if Rice really wants to succeed in reactivating the peace process, she has to prove to the Palestinians and the Arabs that the era of the U.S. administration's blind bias is over. America has to play the role of the 'mediator for good' and not the 'mediator for evil'."

-- "Sharm El-Sheikh summit in the balance"

Columnist Salameh Ukour writes on the op-ed page semi-official, influential Arabic daily Al-Rai (02/07): "There is no doubt that the visit of U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to the region may help reactivate the peace process, particularly since President Bush gave urgent attention to the peace process in his State of the Union address. Moreover, Condoleezza Rice's remarks last week, stressing the

importance of a successful peace process leading to the establishment of the independent Palestinian state, indicates an opportunity to push the peace process forward. This calls for a strong and decisive Arab stand in support of the Palestinians.. The important thing is for Sharon to face a unified stand by the Arab leaders at the Sharm El-Sheikh summit tomorrow; a stand that adheres to Palestinian national principles, particularly the establishment of an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital. It is similarly important for the Sharm El-Sheikh conference to stress that Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza and some West Bank cities is part and parcel of the roadmap, and not an isolated initiative on the part of Ariel Sharon."

HALE